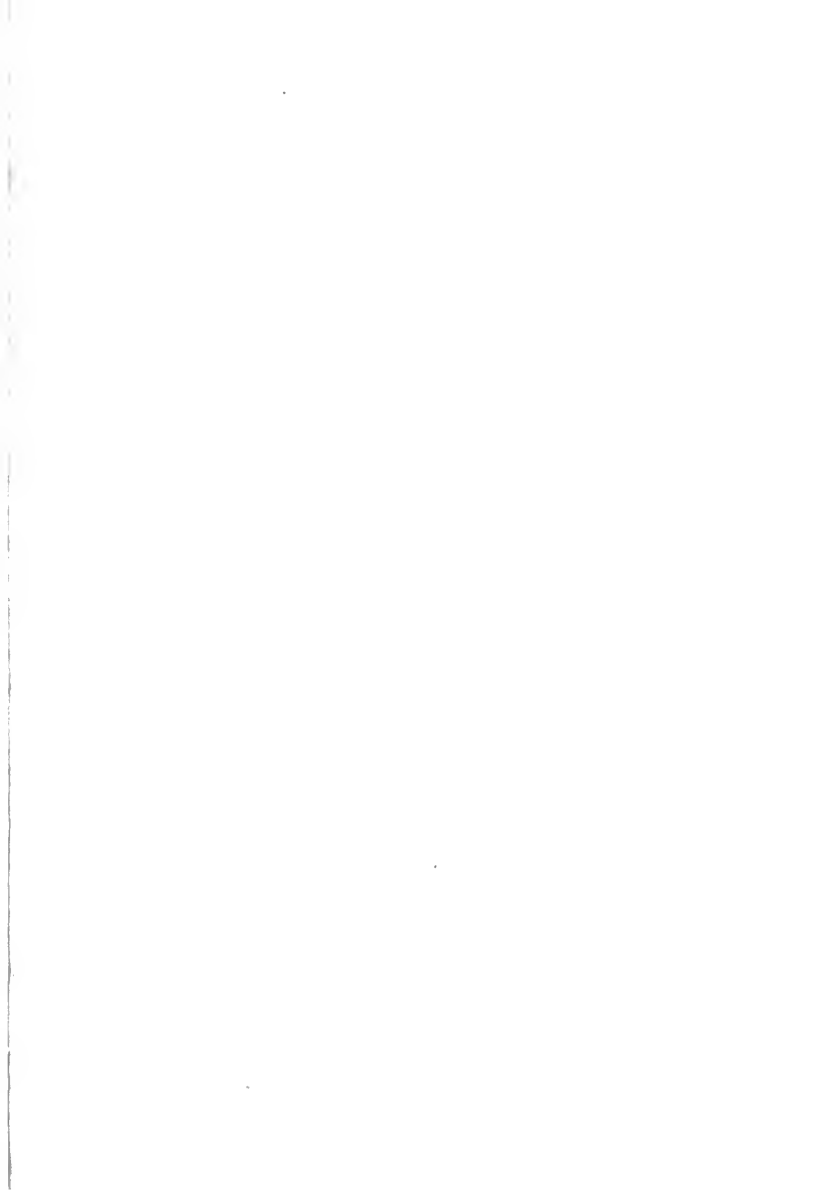


A Knight of The Highway.

**CLINTON
SCOLLARD**







A Knight of the Highway

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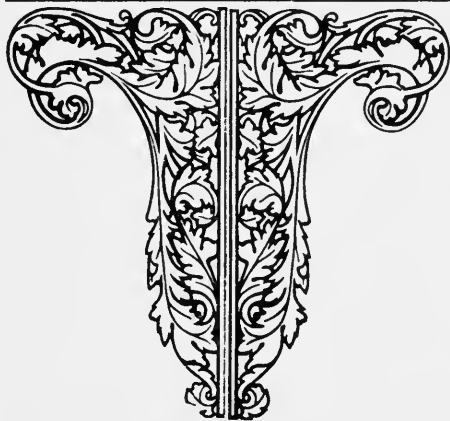
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A KNIGHT OF THE HIGHWAY

By CLINTON SCOLLARD



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To

CHARLES HENRY SMYTH, Ph. D.

This Romance

Of "The Hills of Home."

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A KNIGHT OF THE HIGHWAY

CHAPTER I.

THE NE'ER-DO-WELL

THE powerful locomotive which drew the long freight-train came to a sudden stop. Something in the nature of a spasm, so human was it, communicated itself from car to car, and each in turn ceased to move. The jar wakened Rossiter, outstretched upon the top of some boxes and bales, from a heavy sleep, and on opening his eyes and finding himself encompassed by a breathless tropical blackness he did not for an instant realize where he was. He put out his hand and encountered the boards of the car-roof just above his head. Then he recalled his whereabouts. He was streaming with perspiration, for the atmosphere of the confined space was stifling.

All day the pitiless September sun had

blazed in a coppery heaven; all day the parched earth had given back to the sky the fumes of heat; and yet Rossiter had clung to his oven-like retreat, in the first place because with every revolution of the wheels he was carried nearer to his destination, and in the second place because he could not easily descend from the train while it was in motion. Half a loaf of bread and a few dry cookies had served to quiet the gnawings of hunger, while two wizened lemons had in a measure allayed the pangs of thirst. But now he sought in vain for the last precious bit of fruit which he had intended to keep against this time of urgent need. The jolting of the car had evidently caused his treasure to roll from the spot where he had placed it with such care. Uttering an exclamation of disappointment, he dragged himself a few feet and placed his lips to a crack in the side of the car, through which he drank eagerly great draughts of the partially cooled night air. As he was about to resume his former position he inhaled a heavy waft of engine smoke.

“The devil!” he cried, with a sputter of disgust. “This is more than I can stand!”

He seized his little bundle of clothes and worked his way over the bales and boxes to the door. For a time he feared that he was hopelessly a prisoner, as the obstinate barrier to his escape would not budge. The perspiration streamed from his forehead into his eyes, and his hair was as wet as though he had soused his head in water. He had taken stock of the fastenings when he had stowed himself away at Clevalo, but he was discovering that an easy entrance into a freight-car packed with merchandise that has space enough to shift slightly does not necessarily mean an easy exit.

At length, after several sharp creaks of remonstrance, the door gaped sufficiently to allow him to squeeze his body through. He cast a glance up and down the adjoining track and then leaped. As his feet crunched upon the cinders someone sprang from the next car to the top of the one he had just quitted. It was a brakeman.

"You damn tramp!" he shouted, and raised a hand as though about to hurl a missile.

Rossiter ran, dodging as he went, but

nothing save a harsh guffaw followed from the car-top.

“Sold, Johnny!” bellowed the brakeman; “but I can tell ye if I’d had a hunk of coal, ye’d have got it blim in the back!”

Just then, with a long series of jerks, the train started. An electric light beyond the tracks threw the gesticulating figure on the car-top into strong outline for a moment and the pose held Rossiter’s attention, but the effect was quickly spoiled by the onward movement of the train. Rossiter now turned to survey his surroundings. The blinking electrics told him that he was in a town of considerable size. Above the rumbling cars several large buildings loomed blackly. Behind him the ground sloped sharply to a stream, which he could not see on account of a white vapor which hung over it. At his left was a bridge, and as he examined this, and the ugly frame structures which lined the street toward which it led, a sense of familiarity gave him a swift thrill of surprise.

“The deuce!” he exclaimed. “I wonder if it is?”

He wheeled to the right and regarded

a long freight-house and a tall pile capped by a huge sign, the letters upon which he vainly strove to distinguish. A puzzled expression crossed his face, and he waited impatiently for the caboose of the freight-train to pass. At length the tracks were clear. A few rods away, on one side of a small square, the lights of a hotel twinkled through the branches of a row of elm-trees. Directly opposite was a railway station, a short distance from which a freight-and-accommodation-train was pulling out.

"Illica, by Jove!" cried Rossiter. "Well, if this isn't curious!" and his mind went back a dozen years to the June day when he had last set foot in the quiet city on the banks of the Mohondaga. Then he was a thoughtless youth fresh from college, full of a youth's ideals and dreams, not without ambition,—and now—well, his present status was not one to be contemplated with pride, nor did the vista down which he looked in retrospect afford him many gleams of satisfaction. He was wont to tell himself at times that he had had hard luck, but when he faced the clear, cold truth he knew in his inner-

most soul that luck had played no part whatever in his descent of the ladder of respectability. Never more fully than at this moment, amid surroundings long ago familiar, did he realize what an utter wreck he had made of his life. But he put on the devil-may-care air he was at intervals accustomed to assume and slouched across the tracks in the direction of the station.

“What hour can it be?” he muttered. “Rather late, I judge, by the fact that there are so few people about.”

There was a man standing in the open station door-way whom Rossiter took, from his dress, to be either a ticket agent or conductor. He had his watch in his hand.

“Will you be kind enough to tell me the time?” Rossiter asked.

The railroad man opened his lips as though he were about to answer, but as he glanced at his questioner astonishment seemed to choke his utterance. He looked Rossiter up and down, and finally let his eyes rest upon the vagrant’s countenance, covered with a ten days’ growth of beard, the forehead grimy and streaked with

perspiration, the hair hanging in greasy elf-locks from beneath a torn cap.

“Well, if you ain’t a perfect bloomin’ beauty!” he exclaimed, with an amused chuckle.

Rossiter’s hand went up to his face as he moved on. He searched his pockets for what served him as a handkerchief, pulled it out, and mopped his forehead, cheeks and neck. Then he paused an instant and endeavored to smooth his hair a trifle, but without much success. The man’s words had affected him more than such a speech would usually have done. He had received too many kicks and cuffs and oaths to heed them much, as a rule, but somehow the rebuff which he had just met stung him like a sharp blow upon an open wound. Heretofore he had associated Illica with nothing but pleasant things. Whenever he had visited it formerly from the small town less than a dozen miles distant where he had passed his college days, he had always been treated with very marked favor. To Illica the students frequently sojourned for their half-holidays. It was where they attended the theatre, had their dinners, and sometimes

joined in social functions. Among the young men of his time at Monroe College, as the adjoining institution was called, no one visited Illica more frequently than Rossiter. With plenty of money at his command, possessed of a bright manner and a ready wit, and being withal quite prominent as an athlete, he had once had a number of friends and many acquaintances in the staid but pleasant inland city.

He supposed that he had buried shame; he had told himself that he had worn out regret; but now both rose, alert and aggressive, to torment him. As he moved in the direction of the square, he passed one of the station windows and glanced in. A clock high upon the wall informed him that it was quarter-past eleven.

"I must have a beer, if it takes my last nickel," he said, moistening his parched lips with his tongue.

Presently he rounded the corner of the station, and stood in the full glare of the electric lights. There were a few men seated upon the hotel steps, and at the upper end of the open space a trolley-car was putting down a passenger, otherwise there was no indication of life. Rossiter

plunged a hand into one of his trousers' pockets and drew forth four coins,—a five-cent piece and three pennies. He knew that it would be folly to attempt to enter the hotel, so he started along the north side of the square in search of a saloon. He did not have to go far. A gaily illuminated place, which went by the name of "The Keneseo Thirst Parlor," soon caught his eye. Two men, whom he had not noted in his first survey of the square, were lounging upon opposite sides of the door.

"Is that yer las' chaw o' terbaccer ye've got in yer face, Bill?" demanded one of the other as Rossiter approached.

The expression was not new to him. He had heard it before among men of the class to which these loafers belonged, the class to whose level, or lower, he himself had sunk, but it now carried with it an unwonted reproach. It revealed to him with painful vividness his own position in the world, and he cursed the fate that had caused him to leave the freight-train. Illica was potent in rousing the unwelcome spectre of the past, in stirring memories that he had fancied dead or so somnolent

that they would never waken to plague him, in kindling longings that he had for many a day resolutely banished.

As Rossiter drew near, and it became evident that he was seeking the saloon, the two loungers stepped back to allow him to enter, scanning him with leering curiosity as he walked toward the bar. With one hand he tossed his little bundle of clothes upon the polished slab behind which, in trousers and gauze undershirt, a close-cropped, red-faced Irish-American was standing, and with the other cast down his last precious nickel.

"A glass of beer, for heaven's sake!" said he.

The saloon-keeper shot an amused glance at him, seized a beer-mug, turned a spigot, held the mug up, eyeing its contents critically, blew off the foam, put it beneath the tap again, and then placed it before Rossiter with a flourish.

"Still hotter'n 'ell!" he remarked.

Rossiter answered with a little nod of assent, and then gave himself over to the luxury of the beaded draught. No bottle of wine quaffed in his primrose days had ever afforded him quite the satisfaction he

experienced from that plebeian beer. He set the mug down with a sigh.

"Have another?" asked the saloon-keeper.

Rossiter smiled regretfully and produced his three remaining pennies, chinking them in his hand.

"Guess not," he answered.

"Oh, well," said the man behind the bar good-naturedly, "I see you're ruther down on yer luck. I'll stan' treat. They's some crackers over there," he added, pointing to a nicked dish that stood upon a table on the opposite side of the room.

Rossiter helped himself to a generous handful, and, returning, took up the brimming mug that was awaiting him.

"Here's looking at you," he said. "My best thanks."

"Goin' hop-pickin', I suppose?" said the saloon-keeper tossing off his "pony."

"Hadn't thought of it," replied Rossiter, who now recalled that it was the season of the hop-harvest, when there was a large influx of people into Illica on their way to the hop-fields, a dozen miles or so back among the hills.

"Thought likely ye were. They's a big

crowd goin' this year. They say the crop's heavy, and the price fer pickin' good."

An idea flashed into Rossiter's brain.

"I wonder if I could get a chance to pick?" he queried.

"Gosh, yes!" said the saloon-keeper, "plenty o' chance if ye keep sober."

Rossiter made some additional inquiries in regard to the matter of hop-picking, then, as the saloon-keeper suggested that he guessed he'd shut up, the vagrant took his bundle from the bar and sought the street.

"I might try it," he mused as he strolled aimlessly in the direction of the station. "I'll see how it strikes me in the morning."

Reaching the railway tracks, he halted for a moment in indecision. The station was closed, so it was useless to attempt to get an hour or two of rest upon one of the seats under the plea that he was waiting for a train. Turning to the left, he walked parallel with the tracks for more than thrice a score of paces, crossed a deserted street, and descried directly in front of him a freight-house, along all

sides of which a platform extended. On the side towards the railway some freight-cars were standing upon a switch. He gained the platform and began trying the doors of these cars. They were all securely fastened, however, so he slipped down between one of them and the platform, beneath which he groped his way till he found where some chips and sweepings had been thrown. Here he arranged his bundle for a pillow, stretched himself out, and was soon calmly slumbering. Night-long near him darkened express-trains went rushing by or began to slacken speed with a hiss of steam and a grating of wheels, but they disturbed him not, and when the breezeless dawn began to break he was still sleeping as peacefully as though his bed were one of luxury.

CHAPTER II.

BY THE MOHONDAGA

ROSSITER'S rest was broken the next morning by the rattle and creak of a hand-truck on the boards above his head. Through the open space between the ground and the floor of the freight-car just in front of him he could see the sunlight gleaming upon the rails, and so knew that it was broad day. Commonly, on awakening, he was in no haste to be stirring, but on this occasion he displayed an unusual activity. Almost as soon as he realized that the wonted round of busy men had begun, he sat up, shook the dirt from his bundle and from his clothes and crept from his shelter. Crawling under the freight-car, so that no one about the freight-house should see him and suspect him of mischief, he stepped off briskly, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

The air was still fresh with the cool of the dawn, but the sun was blar and red through the haze that curtained the heavens, and there was every indication

of another sweltering day. On glancing along the street upon which the freight-house faced, Rossiter noted, not far distant, a large sign extending over the sidewalk. "STABLING" was the word which, years previous, had been traced upon it. As Rossiter drew near the sign he beheld a wide gate which gave entrance to an extensive yard in the rear of a second- or third-class hotel. Upon the yard a long shed opened and likewise a capacious barn. In the centre of the barn door-way a hostler was leisurely grooming a horse. Towards this man the vagrant advanced.

"Can I get a job?" asked he, as he came within speaking distance. "I'd be willing to work for a bit of breakfast."

The hostler paused, currycomb in one hand, brush in the other.

"Know anythin' about a hoss?" he demanded, surveying the applicant with considerable doubt.

"Yes," said Rossiter, "something."

"Le's see."

The vagabond dropped his bundle, and the man gave currycomb and brush to him.

"You'll do," he said presently. "I

giss ye kin earn yer brekfust all right enough." He moved away, and Rossiter heard him changing the bedding in the stalls. Then he climbed to the loft and began pitching down hay. After a little he descended, and soon appeared leading another horse.

"That'll do fer the bay," he said "Try yer hand on this 'un."

For an hour or more the new stableman continued his labors, when the hostler announced that it was time for "grub." After a refreshing wash at the barn pump Rossiter followed his companion into a small, bare room which was filled with the odor of cooking. It was a plain meal that the two men sat down to, but it was exceedingly palatable. Neither spoke while eating, and the maid who attended to their wants evidently considered herself decidedly above them, for she did not deign to address them with so much as a single word. When they had finished they went out together.

"Say," said the hostler, as they halted in the centre of the stable yard, "how'd ye like my job fer a couple o' weeks? I want to go hop-pickin'."

"I think some of going myself," replied Rossiter.

"Oh, yer do, eh? Well, if ye don't conclude ter go, I'd be glad to have ye come 'ere. Ye're a pritty tidy hand with a hoss."

"Thanks. What's the job worth?"

"Five a week, with feed an' lodgin'."

"When would you want to know?"

"Any time to-day 'ud do."

"All right. I'll drop around to-night and tell you if I'll come. If you don't see me again, you'll have to find another chap," and Rossiter sought the street.

"Here's luck!" he ejaculated. "May be things are going to take a turn at last." He straightened himself, and something of the reckless sullenness left his face.

"I must find a quiet spot and think it out," he mused.

He crossed the railway tracks, and struck into a narrow street which, he recalled, formerly led to the base-ball grounds and the river. It was a squalid neighborhood in the old days, he remembered, and it did not appear to have changed materially during the years that had elapsed since he had last viewed it.

Ragged children were rolling in the dirt by the roadside, slatternly women even at that hour—nine o'clock had not yet struck—were gossiping from window to window, and two or three men as unkempt as Rositer himself were squirting tobacco-juice over the dilapidated board sidewalk. Both women and men eyed him furtively as he went by, and one of the former flung a coarse jibe after him.

He found an open field where the fenced base-ball grounds had been, and beyond this, as in the past, stretched a level meadow, sweeping away beyond the river to the base of haze-wrapt hills. Quarter of a mile distant he noticed a group of elms upon the banks of the stream, and towards these he directed his steps. When he reached them he cast himself upon the sward in the shade and set his back against one of the massive boles. Behind him was the city, slowly beginning to steam with heat under the pitiless sun; before him was the languid river, low from drought, lazing between its irregular and freshet-washed banks. Far overhead in the lofty boughs was the faint twitter of bird-song.

This was what Rossiter loved. The city meant nothing to him but miserable failure, but the free air of the country carried with it a certain peace of spirit, and for the most part a large forgetfulness. During the three years of his wanderings the virus of vagabondage had so permeated his every fibre that he rarely longed for the existence he had once known. When he was candid with himself he admitted that it was an irreparable blot upon his manhood that he did not strive to rise from the slough into which his own weakness had dragged him. At rare intervals, when thoughts of re-entering the struggle came to him, there was always the old weakness to combat, the realization that not twice but thrice he had played fast and loose with his chances in the world, and so he allowed himself to drift. There was nothing inherently bad in Rossiter's nature; there was no dishonor to be laid at his door. If he had assumed something of the uncouth manners and familiarized himself with the low language of the men with whom he frequently associated, these were surface matters, things which, if occasion demanded, would be sloughed as a

snake drops its skin. Weak though he was, and reckless though he had been when fortune was his, back of all was a fineness that those who came into anything like intimate contact with him could but notice. The lack of a mother's love and guidance, and a mistaken generosity and a subsequent obtuse insistence on the part of his father, accounted for much in the wreck he had made of everything to which he had put his hand. Born with a keen artistic sense, endowed with an unusual amount of real literary talent, his likings had always been made light of at home, and when it came to the choice of a career he had that forced upon him for which he had a positive distaste.

Then his father died; a considerable amount of money fell to him; false friends flattered and cajoled; and very soon he was penniless. His elder brother helped him to a position, but though he did his best, his apparent indifference brought about his dismissal. His sister's husband now tried to give him a lift, but the recipient soon discovered that he was a hindrance rather than an aid, and so one night, returning from his work discour-

aged and embittered, and being reproached by his sister for his general uselessness, he went to his room, put a few traps together, slung them upon a stout cane over his shoulder, and walked out into the darkness, from that hour a vagabond, wandering whither fancy led, now working at this or that, now begging, suffering sometimes, but not without a certain enjoyment in life, vastly happier than he had been when he felt himself dependent on, and a reproach to, those who were his nearest of kin. Such was the story of this ne'er-do-well, a story of weakness, of folly, of heedlessness, but not one of crime or of dishonor.

Having settled himself to his satisfaction under the lofty elm, Rossiter opened the bundle which he had cast by his side—a dilapidated change of underwear, a pair of socks, a vest, and an outing shirt—and extracted a briar-wood pipe of cheap make and a small piece of smoking-plug. From the tobacco he cut with miserly care enough to fill half the pipe-bowl, and having lighted it leaned back with a sigh of comfort. It was the first indulgence of the kind he had allowed himself for several

days, and the fact that he was permitting himself to enjoy so epicurean a pleasure at this morning hour indicated that something of unusual moment was occupying his mind.

After having blown, to his intense satisfaction, two or three fragrant clouds into the warm September air, he took from his pocket a square envelope, from which he drew a letter. This he spread out before him upon one knee. It read in this wise:

“DEAR PHILIP: I have heard from your former friend, Crossgrove, that you have again been seen in or near Kalamanti, and I am sending this enclosed in a note to him in the hope of reaching you. For the sake of our dead father and mother, for your sake, and for the sake of us all, I want you to come back for another trial. Will you not? On the first of October the *Evening Star* passes into the hands of an acquaintance of mine, George Agnew, who intends making some sweeping changes in the staff. Recalling some sketches and skits you once wrote which received much pleasant comment, and the leanings you formerly had towards literature, which father (very unfortunately and injudiciously, I now believe) so insistently discouraged, I spoke of you to Mr. Agnew, who has very generously offered to give you a chance on the paper. October first, as I said above, is the date when the change in man-

agement takes place, and if, by good fortune, you receive this letter, I beg that you will not allow this (perhaps last) opportunity to retrieve yourself to slip from you. I hope that you will believe me still

“Your affectionate brother,

“ARCHIBALD ROSSITER.”

“It’s mighty good of Archie,” commented the wanderer, “a blamed sight too good! I don’t deserve it. I’d probably make a mess of it, just as I have of everything else but this,” and he glanced down at his worn and dusty shoes, and at his faded and weather-stained garb. “And yet,—well, it’s what I always used to think I’d like, and here I am more than half way there.”

When his brother’s missive had been handed to him two weeks previous he had been upon the point of turning south. Instead he set his face eastward, not with a definite idea of falling in with what his brother had proposed, but with that possibility in view. Now, after having had the past so vividly brought before him by his unforeseen tarry in Illica, after having experienced emotions that he had fancied belonged almost totally to a different en-

vironment, he was more strongly moved than ever thus to challenge fate.

But the old weakness, the hesitancy, the dislike of responsibility, fostered by his roving life was not lightly to be overcome; so he lay and debated. Against his undoubted desire to redeem himself, a desire which was gradually strengthening, rose the consciousness of former failure, and also the undeniable fascination his present existence had come to have for him. Half an hour slipped away, an hour, and it was mid-morning. The heat increased, and the reclining man grew drowsy.

Vaguely, as in a dream, he marked two figures cross his angle of vision and follow the river bank to a point not many rods from where he was lying. He saw these persons begin to divest themselves of their clothes, commented to himself that they were going for a swim, and here his scarcely aroused curiosity ceased. He closed his eyes and presently lost consciousness. Twenty minutes had elapsed when a scream rent the quiet air, a sharp, boyish cry of terror. At the second outcry, louder and shriller than the first, Rossiter sat up. A naked form was leap-

ing wildly about upon the river bank, with arms outflung, sending forth one terrified shriek after another. To Rossiter's ears the shouts now resolved themselves into,—

“Help! help!”

The awakened man was on his feet in an instant. In such an emergency as this his habitual indecision did not show itself. Off went his cap, coat and shoes, and away he sprang over the sward towards the distraught figure. He was naturally fleet of foot, and his muscles were hard from hundreds of leagues of tramping.

The youth, for such Rossiter saw the shouter to be, grew more frantic as he realized that aid was approaching, turning first towards the stream and then in the direction from which assistance was coming.

“Oh, quick! be quick!” he cried, but now his voice seemed to fail him, and he did little more than utter a series of incoherent sounds.

Once within view of the river, Rossiter was not slow to grasp the situation. In mid-stream was a bather, who, by a spasmodic action of one hand, was just contriving to keep his head above the surface.

He was swallowing great gulps of water with every movement, and was unquestionably on the verge of sinking.

“Stick to it!” yelled Rossiter, without slackening speed, “I’ll be with you in a minute.”

One spring took him down upon the caked mud below the overhanging sod, and a second carried him waist deep into the river. Then he struck out with vigorous strokes. He approached the exhausted swimmer cautiously, knowing if he would save him he must not allow himself to be caught in his drowning grip. When just beyond the reach of his arms he paused. The poor fellow made a frantic effort to seize hold upon him, but Rossiter was watchful and easily eluded his grasp. It was like the last flicker of a dying flame. With a gasp and a gurgle the man gave over the struggle. Here was Rossiter’s opportunity, and he was alert to improve it. As the sinking bather’s head was disappearing he gave a powerful forward plunge. Out went his hand, and his strong fingers were fastened in a mop of soaking hair. There was but a spark of consciousness left in the body of the man when Ros-

siter jerked his head above water. He was well-nigh a dead weight, and his rescuer had no difficulty in whirling him about and gripping him beneath the armpits. In this wise he pushed him ashore. He began to revive a little as shallow water was reached, and was able, with Rossiter's arm encircling his waist, to drag himself up to the grass of the bank, where he sank in a limp heap. Presently he began to vomit violently, whereat the boy who had been standing by, mouth agape and speechless, commenced to moan and whimper.

"It's the best thing that could happen," said Rossiter reassuringly. "He'll come around all right shortly."

Indeed, it was not long before the rescued man sat up, a look of disgust and loathing upon his features.

"Mother of Moses!" he exclaimed, "but I shouldn't want Mohondaga water for a steady diet!"

He caught Rossiter's eye and smiled.

"You were just in time," he said. "Jim, there, ain't worth shucks. He can't swim a stroke. Another minute an' I'd 'a' croaked."

"It was rather a close shave," observed Rossiter.

"Gee, yes!" This was said with considerable emphasis, and a suspicion of color began to creep into the young man's pallid cheeks.

He was perhaps twenty-six or -seven years of age, and as Rossiter now glanced from his face to that of the boy, who had edged close to him, he saw at once from the strong resemblance between them that they must be brothers, the younger being hardly more than sixteen. They were not unattractive faces, either of them, and in the elder's Rossiter read lines of determination and self-reliance that made him for the instant envious. Both were slimly fashioned, with a slight stoop to the shoulders, and both had the lifeless complexions of those who spend little time in the open air. They had clear eyes of steel-blue, and the hair of the elder curled slightly. He had, moreover, an insignificant brown mustache.

"Come out in the sun," said Rossiter to the one he had rescued; "it'll brace you up."

He gave the young man a helping hand,

and steadied him after he had got upon his feet.

“Cripe, but I’m weak!” the whilom swimmer said. “You wouldn’t think it ’ud take it out of a fellow so,” and he sat down near where he had laid his clothes.

Rossiter now began to realize the condition of his own garments.

“I believe I’ll have to wring my things out,” he remarked, “and let them dry in the sun,” and he proceeded forthwith to put this scheme into execution.

For a space little was said, the two brothers absently watching the vagrant as he spread his worn articles of apparel on the grass. Finally the elder spoke up quickly.

“How’d you happen along just as you did?” he inquired.

“Oh, I was having a nap over yonder,” answered Rossiter, waving his hand in the direction of the elm under which he had been reclining, “and I heard your brother shout.”

“Having a nap, eh?” this with considerable surprise, as though the speaker could not understand the philosophy of a mid-morning indulgence of that character.

“Yes, but—” with a swift shift of the topic of conversation—“you haven’t told me what was the trouble with you out there,” and Rossiter nodded towards the water.

“Oh, a cramp caught me. I must have been too warm when I went in. It doubled me all up on one side, and I called to Jim, who was paddlin’ about in shallow water. He ran out onto the bank scart stiff, and began yellin’ like mad. It’s darn lucky he did, I guess.”

At this the younger brother laughed foolishly.

“Say,” continued the elder, “you’ve done me a blamed good turn—”

“Don’t mention it,” said Rossiter, interrupting him.

“But, by gosh, I’m goin’ to!” cried the young man. “What do you take me for? Now, as I say, you’ve done me a good turn, and I’d like to do you one, if you’ll let me.”

He looked at Rossiter appealingly.

“Well,” said the latter.

“You’re in hard luck, ain’t you? No offence meant.”

Rossiter lowered his eyes.

"Suppose I am?" said he.

"Got anythin' at all to do?"

"I had an offer this morning."

"Somethin' that you care about?"

"I can't say that it is."

"Come along with us, then!" this with a sudden enthusiastic burst of confidence.

"My mother 'nd sister 'nd Jim 'nd me's goin' hop-pickin'. We've just come up this mornin' from Fallsburg down the river where we live, and are goin' into the country this afternoon. Fine place, bully 'grub', 'nd all that! A chum o' mine was to have been along, but he backed out at the last minute, so it'll be all o. k., won't it, Jim?"

"Sure!" exclaimed the boy.

Rossiter was more than surprised at this spontaneous proposal. He was not accustomed to gratitude, and that he should inspire anyone with enough confidence to suggest such an arrangement struck him with something like amazement. But the more he meditated upon the suggestion the more tempting it was to him. Three weeks and a half had yet to elapse before the first of October. If he should decide to return and accept the offer made

by his brother's acquaintance, here was an opening which would enable him to go back with a little money in his pocket, doubtless more than he could earn as a hostler.

"It's mighty good of you to mention such a thing," said he. "Are you sure you really mean it?"

"Mean it!" echoed the young man,—
"well, I guess!"

"Then I'm with you!" exclaimed Rossiter, surprised the instant he had spoken at his own earnestness and decision.

"My name's Joe Becraft," said the young man, "and this is my brother Jim."

"Mine is Philip Rossiter,—Phil, if you like," said the vagabond, and then he was suddenly conscious that he had given his full name for the first time in three years. Ross he had been accustomed to call himself when there was any question of identity.

"Is it a good omen," he asked himself, "or is it but the beginning of another failure?"

CHAPTER III.

OFF FOR THE HOP-FIELDS

YOU see it's like this," Joe Becraft was saying as the three trudged slowly in the blazing sun across the meadow towards the city. "The mill where I've been workin' these six years, an' where Jim's just startin' in, has shut down a month for repairs, so we're gettin' a holiday. Ma always goes pickin' hops, an' Mame,—she's my sister,—but Jim an' me, we ain't so lucky every year."

"You like it then?" inquired Rossiter.

"You'd better believe I do. So'd you if you were shut up in a mill all the rest of the time."

"Haven't you a good position?"

"Oh, yes, I'm not kickin'. I'm under-overseer in the cardin'-room. I'll get to be overseer, perhaps, one of these days, an' then—" He broke off. There was a happy look in his eyes and he gave a little laugh, while Jim chuckled audibly.

"What are you snickerin' at, you young jay?" cried his brother, making a pretence

of being provoked, and vainly trying to cuff the offender.

The more Rossiter talked with the elder Becraft the more did he grow to respect if not to admire him, he was so wholly natural, so independent, so self-poised, and yet so entirely without conceit. He was uneducated, save in a rudimentary way, having been the mainstay of the family for eight years, yet he kept himself informed on the topics of the day, and had his opinions on public affairs, which were more free from bias than the views held by most of those in his station in life. Crude he was, but earnest, frank, and warm-hearted, and Rossiter was shamed when he contrasted his own weakness and lack of purpose with this young fellow's unassuming strength.

As the three reached the square beyond the railway tracks, Rossiter noticed that Joe Becraft was beginning to lag and show signs of exhaustion.

"You'd better have a drink of whiskey to brace you up," he said.

"A milk shake will do the business," Becraft replied. "It's too hot for whiskey. Maybe you'd like a nip, though," he

added, with a peculiar sidelong glance, which the vagrant caught. It was as though the younger man was surmising what the elder's habits might be.

"Oh, no," Rossiter said, not betraying the fact that he noticed Becraft's scrutiny, "I'm not much on whiskey myself. I like a little beer now and again, however."

"Yes, beer ain't bad, but the shake is what I need now. I feel a bit empty."

They stopped at a drug store upon the corner above the saloon where Rossiter had refreshed himself the previous night. A prescription clerk who was bending obsequiously over a glass case listening to the wants of two ladies, gave a frowning start as he descried the bedraggled trio, and half opened his lips as though to bid them be gone. He appeared to take a second thought, however, and unrebuffed the three approached the sign-embellished soda-fountain, behind which a spruce youth stood grinning.

"We've had an outside wettin'," announced Joe Becraft to the dispenser of drinks, nodding at Rossiter, "an' we'd like to balance off matters by havin' something inside. What's yours? and yours, Jim?"

"We'd better follow your brother's example, hadn't we?" asked Rossiter, appealing to the younger Becraft.

"Yes, a shake's all right," replied Jim.

The youth of the soda fountain, with a series of flourishes, deeming he had those before him whom he could impress with his dexterity, proceeded to mix the desired beverage, which all three drank through gelatinous-looking tubes in lieu of straws.

"That's pleasanter 'an the drink I had down yonder," remarked Joe Becraft as he finished, a merry glint leaping into his eyes.

Presently they stood again upon the sidewalk together.

"My mother's waitin' at the Mansion Hotel," said the elder Becraft. "That's where the hop-wagon's to come for us about two o'clock. Now before we go up, for we want you to come along with us, I've got something to propose. You'll take it all right, won't you?"

"Perhaps I know what it is," answered Rossiter, for several times he had seen Becraft furtively regarding his hair and beard.

"Do you?"

"I can guess."

“Well, if that’s the case, you ain’t a-goin’ to mind, are you? You can pay me back, you know.”

“You’ll trust me to pay you back, then?”

“Trust you to? Why, of course I will. You’ll pay me if you’ve got anything to pay with, an’ you’ll have it all right after a little.”

“I don’t believe there are many who would take your view of it.”

“P’raps not, for, to tell the truth, you ain’t what the boys would call ‘a swell.’ But a shave an’ a hair-cut ’ll make a sight of difference. I know of a place close by where we’ll go. A chap from our town keeps it.”

As they turned from the main thoroughfare, which was called Keneseo Street, a puff of warm wind blew a cloud of dust in their faces.

“Thunder!” ejaculated Joe Becraft, “I’ve swallowed enough nasty stuff for one day. Do you know,” he added, “for a fine city, this town has spells o’ bein’ pretty dirty, though it’s a blame sight better’n it used to be.”

Rossiter was not posted in the matter

of municipal street-cleaning, so he did not reply to these observations. They had not walked more than a block when they saw a barber's striped pole, and entered a little shop where a dapper young man, with elaborately brushed hair and a not over-clean white duck jacket, was making change for a customer whom he had been shaving.

"Hullo, Joe!" said this individual, "what are you up to?"

"Oh, the mill's shut down for a few weeks, an' I'm off hop-pickin' with the family," answered Becraft. "Friend of mine, here," he continued, indicating Rositer, "wants you to fix him up."

The barber's attention was for the first time directed to the companion of the Becraft brothers.

"Say—" he began.

"No jollyin', now," interrupted Joe. "He took an oath a while ago that he wouldn't get a shave or a hair-cut till you had a decent railway station in this 'pent-up' town of yours, but he's backed out."

The barber exploded in a guffaw.

"Lucky for him he has," he answered, "unless he means to hire out to Barnum

an' Bailey or Buffalo Bill as the wild man of Borneo."

While Rossiter's locks were being trimmed and his beard removed, Joe Becraft and his tonsorial friend kept their tongues continually wagging, Joe also improving the opportunity to tidy himself somewhat. The conversation between the two had chiefly to do with the town of their nativity and a certain portion of its inhabitants, and Rossiter listened with not a little inward amusement, for each young man had, in his way, a sense of broad humor that flashed out in their comments upon people. Finally the barber's task was accomplished, and he removed the soiled apron from Rossiter's neck with a flourish and a,—

"There you are, sir!"

"Gosh!" Joe Becraft exclaimed, "I wouldn't believe you were the same fellow."

The change in the vagabond's appearance was indeed great. His rather large, clear-cut features showed to an advantage without beard or mustache, and though the lines of his chin indicated a lack of decision, one studying his face for the first

time would have said that its possessor was endowed with a strong individuality. His deep brown eyes were laughing and grave by turns. The discontent and bitterness which showed in the expression of his mouth were not to be seen habitually. Dissipation had left no mark upon his countenance, for although at times Rositer had imbibed freely, he was very far from being a drunkard; indeed, he had no special taste for liquor, and had frequently resorted to it not so much because he craved it as because it took him out of himself.

Becraft produced some silver and paid his townsfellow.

"It's my treat to-day," he explained.

They now retraced their steps to Keneseo Street, and followed this thoroughfare until they came to the elaborate lift-bridge spanning the Ontario Canal. From time to time Becraft regarded his new friend speculatively.

"Say," he at length broke out, as the three paused and leaned over the railing, idly scanning a steam-packet that was moored below, "you've been used to a different sort of life, haven't you?"

Rossiter did not reply at once.

"Yes," he said finally.

"Had an education, an' all that?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. You don't talk like,—well, like most of the people I know."

"I'm not aware of any difference."

"Oh, yes you are. That is, you would be if you'd stop to think about it."

"I got through thinking some time ago, at least I so imagined until lately."

"You know, an educaton," said Becraft, not heeding Rossiter's last remark, "is something I'm always wishin' I had. It's a great thing."

"I've certainly not done very much with mine," replied the wanderer.

"How'd it happen?"

"It's hard to say. I don't doubt another—you, for instance—would have profited by it, but as for me—" He ended with an expressive shrug of his shoulders.

They continued to look at the steam-packet for several minutes longer, and then resumed their walk towards the Mansion Hotel.

"Don't b'lieve we'd better say anythin' about my swimmin' experience to Ma,

Jim," observed Joe Becraft, as they left the main street for the narrower thoroughfare where the hotel they sought was situated. "Like as not she'd have a blue fit."

"Bet she would," replied Jim.

"She's pretty nervous about my health sometimes," Joe explained. "You see, father died o' consumption."

"Why should you ever say anything to her about it?" inquired Rossiter. "Certainly, so far as I am aware, there's not the slightest reason for your doing so."

"Oh, but I want her to know some day what you did for me. I'll tell her about it up in the hop-yard. She won't take on so there. I mean, she won't give it to me quite so strong about bein' careless, an' all that."

"Have it as you will," said Rossiter, "but I should be rather better pleased if you made no mention of it whatever."

"I'm goin' to introduce you," said Joe, "as a friend who's done me a good turn. That'll explain our fetchin' you along."

Rossiter now descried in the distance the staring letters—MANSION HOTEL—above a large and rambling wooden build-

ing, so he intimated that before he met the mother and sister of his companions he would like to make a slight change in his apparel.

“I’ve got another shirt in here,” he said, displaying his bundle, “that looks more presentable than the one I’m wearing.”

“Ma ain’t over particular,” said Joe, but as Rossiter insisted, they turned up at the side of the hotel and sought the stables, where the vagrant made the desired alteration. He could but smile to himself as he was effecting this, the experience was so novel to him. It was many a long day since he had given much heed to what anyone thought of him.

The hotel stood upon a corner, and on two sides of it there was a wide veranda, at one end of which mother and daughter were sitting. The girl was a plain, shy miss of seventeen, while the mother proved to be a woman of ample proportions, with a worn but kindly face which showed that her path through life had not been among the roses. Her manner towards Rossiter was at first marked by a decided reserve, but when her son ex-